

AD-HOC PUBLICS AND INFLUENCERS ON THE RUSSIAN TWITTER: THE CASE OF DISCUSSION ON MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of discussion platforms like Twitter, the hopes rose that computer-mediated public sphere would become more even in access to discussion than mass-mediated public sphere of the late 20th century. Scholars have argued that it will eventually form an ‘opinion crossroads’ where conflicts would be discussed by all the parties involved. But today, existing research provides mixed evidence on whether ordinary users, rather than mainstream media and institutional actors, can become influencers in discussions on current issues, e.g. relations between host and migrant communities. We focus on the Twitter discussion about an inter-ethnic conflict in Moscow’s Biryuliovo district in 2013, as well as the comparative ‘calm’ period in March 2014, and look at who were real influencers by reconstructing the discussion’s web graph, as well as analyzing and juxtaposing its metrics to figures indicating user activity. Our results show that ad hoc discussion differs dramatically from an issue-based one in terms of the influencer nature and composition; the role of active tweeting is questioned. We also show that nationalist accounts play a much bigger role than expected in both periods.

Keywords: influencer, migrants, Twitter, Russia, social network analysis

INTRODUCTION

Public discussions as a tool of formation of public opinion and of casting impact upon resolution of social unease have long been studied and theorized. By 1990s, it was established that mediatized public sphere with traditional media playing the role of information hubs was highly uneven in access to opinion expression and privileged institutional players like political elites and corporations. Media themselves became prioritized as well, as agenda setting, issue framing and other media effects became a factor in public decision making.

With the emergence of Internet, hopes arose that networked communicative spaces would provide better access to citizens to public discussions [1], which would equalize them, at least to some extent, to the existing institutional opinion leaders selected by media who serve as gateways and gatekeepers of public agenda. But this optimism soon changed to a more realistic (or, rather, pessimistic) view [2], as the growing body of research shows that the disparities detected before tend to be reproduced, rather than

Twitter activity in both periods and the equally striking dominance of open nationalist and 'patriotic' accounts contradicts the existing knowledge on the Russian Twitter as the 'opinion crossroads', which provides implications for further research.

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